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and Society in Post-Boxer China, 1900-1937**

Patrick Fuliang Shan

Abstract

The Boxer Rebellion of 1900, originally a regional anti-Christian and anti-foreign movement in Western Shandong, turned to be a sensational international event, prompting eight great powers to dispatch a large number of troops for its suppression. Ironically, soon after the catastrophe, Christianity entered into a golden age as the number of Chinese converts skyrocketed while the religion enjoyed an unprecedented growth. It was only temporarily halted by the Japanese invasion in 1937. This paper probes the complicated relationship among church, state and society during this historical era. It tries to figure out factors leading to the booming enterprise as it argues that a number of reasons had contributed to the new phenomenon, such as governmental preferential policies, liberal political and social milieu, missionaries' new strategies, indigenous Christian efforts, and tenacious accommodations by Chinese believers.

Introduction

The historical setting for Christianity in China in 1900 was a desperate one, as a regional anti-Christian uprising in Shandong known as the Boxer Rebellion spread out to engulf northern China targeting the religion, and prompting eight great powers to dispatch an expeditionary force for its suppression. During the conflict, two hundred or more Western missionaries were killed, their facilities destroyed, and many more left the country. Thousands upon thousands Chinese believers were ruthlessly slaughtered. W.A.P. Martin, a missionary in China for decades, besieged in Beijing in 1900, lamented that "our life long service had been so little valued" (Covell, 1978, p.237). Many foreigners predicted that China would never prove to be fertile soil for Christianity. In 1900 believers confronted the miserable prospect that their religion would not revive in a long time, and few would quarrel with such a pessimistic judgment.

Yet, after the colossal upheaval of 1900 and throughout the turbulent decades of the early 20th century, Christianity grew rapidly in the country. Not only did missionaries return to their posts, but also their converts multiplied dramatically. The number of Chinese Catholics in 1900 was 721,000, but by 1920 had increased to two million, while Protestants grew from 37,000 in 1900 to 346,000 in 1920 (Lutz, 1988, p.2). By 1936 Protestants numbered 700,000 while Catholics had reached about three million (Suman, 2006, p.150; Cary-Elwes, 1957, p.292). By time the communists came to power, the Protestant population stood at one million and the Catholic at more than three million (Lee, 2007, p.282). A wide range of sources provides data to confirm this steady trend over the thirty-

seven year span from 1900 to 1937, which witnessed a sixteen fold increase in Protestant converts and a quadrupling of the number of Catholic believers.

Scholars have offered differing opinions on what should be considered Christianity's "golden years" during this period. Li Wei chooses the two decades from 1901 to 1921 (Song, 1995, p.50, p.69); Zheng Yongfu and Tian Hailin consider the post-1911 era as the golden age for the church (Zheng, 1994, p.1320), Gu Weimin makes it the 1900-20 decades (Gu, 1996, p.351), and Lin Zhiping settles on 1927-37 as the Ten Year Revival of Christianity (Shao, 1980, p.48). These positions all have their justification, yet from the longer perspective the whole 1900-37 period stands out exceptionally for the advancement of Christianity in China. (None of the above scholars questions the high-speed growth of the longer period). Most literature on this topic is narrative in nature, and explanation of this period of rapid growth not so strong on analysis. The ties between church, state and society leave room for further exploration. Various questions remain outstanding. How did Chinese rulers treat Christians and what measures did they enforce? Did missionaries adapt to the new situation? What role did native Christians play in the expansion of the religion? It must be noted that no single paper can cover the entire range of this historical phenomenon; this one sets out to offer some preliminary interpretations on some key facets of the problem.

Chinese Official Flexibility

It would be a rash to dismiss the conventionally accepted argument that the failure of the anti-Christian Boxers contributed to the revival of Christianity. After the dust settled, xenophobic forces were eliminated, bringing an end to anti-Christian violence, and enabling China to enter an unprecedented period of positive responsiveness to Christianity (Gu, 1996, p.351).

While the defeat of the Boxers may represent a "rupture" in the anti-Christian tradition, their elimination could not in itself automatically usher in a golden age for Christianity. To locate the truth, several factors should be examined. First of all Chinese official attitudes must be probed. Without government support by the Empress Dowager Cixi and her high officials, the Boxers would not have been able to launch such a widespread uprising. After they were crushed, the official stance changed abruptly. As William R. Manning observed, when Cixi returned to Beijing in late 1901 she and Emperor Guangxu "made a deep bow to the foreign onlookers ... her attitude and expression seemed to appeal for forgiveness of the past and to show an intention of ushering in an entirely new phase in the relation of foreigners with the court" (Manning, 1910, p.864). While the nationalist Chinese interpretation that the Qing court now became a "puppet regime" is an exaggeration, it is true that the Qing government adopted a series of favorable measures towards foreign missionaries and their religious enterprise.

No sooner had the Boxers been suppressed than the government ensured that anti-Christian leaders were punished and pro-Boxer officials removed. In Shanxi, at least one person in every prefecture was prosecuted. In Hubei, any official who had been involved in Boxer riots lost all chance of holding official position again. The central government

requested that various levels of administrations treat foreign missionaries with decorum (Luo, 1964, p.283, p.291). According to one scholar, this protective measure enabled “missionaries... freely [to] enter China’s hinterland unchecked” (Luo, 2004, p.36). Although the regime never endorsed Christianity, its policies yielded results welcomed by missionaries. James Addison Ingle gratefully noted in 1902 that during a sermon in Hubei, “several of the officials had come to call, and one had sent men to guard the gate and prevent the intrusion of undesirable persons” (Jefferys, 1913, p.209). When Canadian Protestant missions returned to Henan, the provincial governor greeted them and ordered local officials to treat them in gentlemanly fashion, without any sign of arrogance (Song, 1995, p.111).

The rapid revival of the church was achieved partially through government compensation. As soon as the Boxer Rebellion ended, officials in affected regions signed agreements with missionaries and Chinese converts to pay for losses. As attested to in countless archival sources, these settlements made possible the ready rebuilding of churches and other facilities and the reestablishment of congregations. For example, Canadian missions in Anyang received \$50,000 Canadian dollars, which enabled them to restore their premises and resume their work (Song, 1995, p.111).

The changed government attitude resulted in a lessening of anti-Christian violence. Compared with 400 major cases which occurred between 1840 and 1900, post-Boxer China experienced far less violence. This does not mean that anti-Christian sentiment disappeared; on the contrary, anti-Christian hostility continued due to property disputes, religious confrontations, cultural clashes, and social unrest. However, the new cases tended to be localized, sporadic and small-scale, even though a few outbreaks of violence shocked the whole nation, such as the Changsha incident of 1910 (No. 2 Archives, 1991, p.34). Whenever an incident of this nature occurred, officials responded swiftly by “arresting the principal convicts, safeguarding the church, and protecting the victims” (No. 1 Archives, 1985, p.193). Costly settlements prompted officials to adopt measures to forestall such incidents. After resolving a case in Ninghai in 1904, the governor of Zhejiang, Nie Jigui, traced the origins of new anti-Christian events to trivial lawsuits, which led him to advise the emperor that “it would be better to enforce measures of prevention rather than having to handle a case after its occurrence” (Shen, 1991, p.1965). In the same year, Zhang Zhidong, the viceroy of Hunan and Hubei, settled the Shinan case and then notified the emperor that “from now on, proper stratagems should be used to avert such potential troubles” (Shen, 1991, p.1985).

Casting a broad net, the imperial government issued edicts requiring officials to familiarize themselves with treaty clauses and diplomatic procedures pertaining to Christianity (Shen, 1991, p.1965). Under such prompting, official attitudes changed. James Addison Ingle noted in 1903 that the viceroy attended a missionary school’s ceremony and “spoke highest praises of what he saw” (Jefferys, 1913, p.223). Soon after the Boxer Uprising, Samuel Pollard wrote that “a gentleman – a Chinese official – has offered a thousand ounces of silver a year if the Methodists will send a missionary to open a school in his town” (Grist, 1971, p.126).

At the same time as the Qing were moving toward a more favorable position on Christianity, Sun Yat-sen, whose mission was to overthrow the dynasty, personally

advanced the cause of Christianity. Sun was deeply influenced by the religion when he attended a missionary school in Honolulu, Hawaii. He was baptized by Charles Robert Hager in Hong Kong in 1883. Throughout his life, he claimed to be a Christian, even though his platform was largely political (Soong, 1997). Sun justified his revolutionary commitment by claiming Jesus was fighting to transform the existing social, political and religious order. He declared: "I am not a church-bound Christian, but a Jesus-bound Christian. Jesus himself is a revolutionary" (Zheng, 1994, p.1319). When he organized the China Revival Society, Sun required new members make a solemn pledge by placing their hands on the Bible. Many of the participants in his uprisings in South China were Christians (Zheng, 1994, p.1317). When the Revolutionary Alliance [Tongmenghui] was established in 1905, Sun stated in its platform that "anyone who murdered a foreigner and who destroyed a church would be executed" (Zheng, 1994, p.1317). Sun Yat-sen and his fellow revolutionaries matched their words defending Christianity with actions. Six days after the Wuchang Uprising in 1911, the military commander at Wuhan issued an order to the local people that they were "not to harm foreigners and damage their property, in particular, not to burn ... churches" (Xihai, 1986, p.24). Such measures led missionaries to welcome the 1911 Revolution as the dawn of a new era (Metallo, 1978, p.265).

Although the revolution was fundamentally political in nature, it had a number of clear linkages to the Christian church. Because of Sun's prominent role in events, it was hailed by missionaries as a "Christian revolution" (Zheng, 1994, p.1321). Nelson Bitton remarked in 1914 that "the fact that many of the chief leaders of the revolution had been Christian students and that Sun Yat-sen was a confessed Christians, gave to the Revolution an identification with Christianity ... and the inclusion of Christian men in the first cabinet ... brought the Church into undue prominence in this connection" (Bitton, 1914, p.211). One Christian scholar remarked that "Christianity became a popular religion because of the revolution ... Christianity flourished and the fact that Sun, as father of the new republic, was a Christian, helped tremendously" (Suman, 2006, p.145). Sun took swift action on freedom of religion as soon as his presidency began. On January 5, 1912 in his proclamation to foreign nations, Sun "promised the Chinese with freedom of faith" (Zheng, 1994, p.1319). In a letter to his British Christian friend, Sun stated that "we are seeking religious liberty in China... under the new system, Christianity will certainly become prosperous" (Zheng, 1994, p.1320). On March 11, 1912, Sun signed "The Preliminary Constitution of the Republic of China" granting freedom of faith. Even if it was not solely designed for Christianity, it was tantamount to ending a century-long anti-Christian tradition as it created a legal arena in which believers could seek state protection. But Christianity also merited recognition for what it was, as Sun's colleague, the famous revolutionary Huang Xing, said to missionaries in 1913: "Christianity is far more widespread in its influence than you missionaries realize. Its ideals have pervaded China ... These ideas appeal to the Chinese; they largely caused the Revolution and they largely determined its peaceful character" (Wallace, 1914, p.88).

Sun Yat-sen's political enemy, Yuan Shi-kai, maintained the above position in his constitutions. Yuan did not inherit Sun's political ideals, but he had promised to respect the provisional constitution and the religious clauses became statute in the constitution of 1914. It may be said that Yuan already had taken the measure of the Christian presence in China,

as he had crushed the Boxer movement in Shandong in order to prevent entanglements with missionaries and the foreign powers, and he had handled the post-Boxer settlement there. As soon as he took power following Sun Yat-sen's resignation in the spring of 1912, he received a deputation of Chinese Christian pastors and solemnly pledged his government would give equality of standing and opportunity to Christianity. A few days later, Yuan dispatched his representatives to a mass meeting in Beijing to publicly repeat that pledge (Wallace, 1914, p.83). Under Yuan, anti-Christian incidents further decreased and missionaries penetrated further into the interior. Wherever they traveled, their feelings were consistently positive, as William Charles White wrote in 1913 from Henan: "A new attitude with regard to Christianity has developed. The official heads of China are most sympathetic to Christianity, though they have not openly embraced it. The gentry and literati though not opposing Christianity are speaking in praise of it, are thinking out a suitable religion as a national religion for China" (Walmsley, 1974, p.122).

Yuan's policy had its political motivations. Michael V. Metallo notes that most missionaries supported Yuan, as they viewed him as "probably the best ruler for China under the existing circumstances" (Metallo, 1978, p.280). What most pleased missionaries was his permitting Christians to join his cabinet and to serve as officials and staff at all levels of administrations. For example, in Guangdong, 65% of provincial staff were Christians, and in the newly formed parliament in Beijing, many were Christians, among them sixty Protestants (Luo, 2004, p.48). Yuan also enforced a number of measures favorable to the church. A few months after he assumed the presidency, his government allowed Christian services in the grounds of the Temple of Heaven (Wallace, 1914, p.83). This was a breakthrough in the history of Chinese ritual, as for hundreds of years the Temple of Heaven was the holy site for emperors to worship Heaven, central to traditional religious practices of Confucianism. The Temple of Heaven was reserved with other three temples in Beijing, those of Earth, Sun and Moon, for worship of supernatural deities. Now Christians came to venerate the Almighty at the Temple of Heaven, an act hitherto unimaginable.

Yuan Shi-kai's government went further in employing Christianity to uphold his presidency. When Yuan faced an uprising in 1913, his government ordered all provincial governors and high-ranking officials to contact church leaders, entreating them to pray for Yuan as the national leader. While this may seem a strange request for a non-Christian regime to make, it was meant in full seriousness: "upon receipt of this telegram you are requested to notify all Christian churches in your provinces that April 27th has been set aside as a day of prayer" (Wallace, 1914, p.84). Yuan's request appealed to Christians and one missionary exclaimed that this was an "instinct cry to God for help" (Wallace, 1914, p.84). Missionaries always had hoped to convert the ruling elite, and Yuan's sympathies evoked a strong optimism in them. W. A. P. Martin remarked that Yuan "favors the Holy faith" and felt that Yuan could be "the Constantine for a Christian China" (Covell, 1978, p.262). However, Yuan discouraged such hopes, forthrightly informing an American missionary that "I am not a Christian ... I am a Confucianist" (Wallace, 1914, p.89). His later efforts to turn Confucianism into a state religion provoked Christians. Overall, it is fair to argue that he had been lenient to the church which he saw as a part of Chinese life, and he offered to missionaries that "unless the ethics of Christianity dominated ... China, there

is no hope for the Republic” (Wallace, 1914, p.89).

After Yuan’s inglorious restoration of the dynastic system and his sudden death in 1916, his successors in North China carried on his program of tolerance, while Sun Yat-sen and his successors in South China continued their supportive policies. When Sun died in 1925, he called on his followers to fight against Satan as he had throughout his life. Two years after his death, his successor Chiang Kai-shek converted to Christianity, in the first instance because of his marriage to Meiling Song, but also because he saw himself as Sun Yatsen’s disciple and heir. The Nanjing government established under Chiang in 1927 proved not only supportive of Christianity but also worked closely with Christian missionaries and converts, leading many Christians to speak of the 1927-37 decade as the Ten Years’ Revival. However, the rise of power of Chiang and the Guomindang (Nationalist Party) brought the believers up against a new enemy: the communists. In general, most missionaries supported Chiang and viewed communism as a threat. This fear was justified as some missionaries were executed by the communists on the charge that they “have ruined China ... become friends of Chiang Kai-shek, the greatest enemy of China” (Calvin College: Huizenga Collection). However, communist contact with Christian missionaries was minimal, as they occupied small bases in the mountains while fighting off Chiang’s attacks. The Christian enterprise continued to grow under Chiang’s political patronage.

Missionary Adoption of New Strategies

Primary sources and current historiography have been focused on the cultural clash embodied in the Boxer rebellion, which dealt a heavy blow to the church. In the wake of the uprising, foreign missionaries withdrew, watching hopelessly the desperate situation they left behind. This seems to confirm the dominant paradigm of cultural confrontation. Yet soon after the violence Christian missions entered a period of steady and sometimes rapid expansion. Given the emphasis put on the notion of cultural conflict, it is necessary to deal with the question of reconciliation in order to explain the revival and prospering of the church.

No sooner were the Boxers suppressed than missionaries returned to their posts to resume work or open new stations. Many came back with fervor as they believed that their enterprise would flourish after the tragedy. As Isaac Ketler wrote in 1902, “the blood of the martyr is the seed of the Church” (Hevia, 1992, p.321). In the same year, James Addison Ingle, viewing the dramatic change in official attitude, wrote that “turning now to the field of our labor, we find ourselves face to face with opportunity such as the Church in China has never before seen ... the land is open before us” (Jefferys, 1913, p.202).

In the changed world of post-Boxer China missionaries saw that they had to make adjustments to this new environment. American Protestant missionaries declared in December 1901 at a memorial service for Christian victims that they would not “press for punishment of the guilty, provided Chinese officials should make public atonement and impress the people with the necessity of respecting and protecting missionaries and their converts” (Manning, 1910, p.870). Missionaries naturally reflected on the ordeal they had

suffered, but they also gave consideration to the wrongdoings of the imperialist powers that led to Chinese xenophobia. Edward W. Wallace commented that “it is shameful that ‘Christian nations’ have forced ‘heathen China’ to re-learn the arts of war which she thought she had outgrown centuries ago” (Wallace, 1914, p.91). China indeed had been the victim repeatedly in the 19th century of imperialist gunboats; thus, as James Endicott remarked, “the Chinese have some justification for their anti-foreign feeling” (Endicott, 2003, p.32). This sense of guilt urged missionaries to be more compliant and less assertive in front of the Chinese and prompted them to distinguish mission work from imperialist incursion.

To further demonstrate their personal integrity, missionaries sought to emphasize their selfless devotion to their calling. James Hudson Taylor declared that his mission would not take a single penny from the Boxer compensation, even though his China Inland Mission was offered a huge amount. He stated that he had nothing to request but only wanted to dedicate himself to the country he loved. He later summarized his calling in the following famous motto: “If I had one thousand pounds, China can take all of them; if I had one thousand lives, I would reserve none to myself but all to China” (Gu, 1998, p.2). Missionaries in the post-Boxer era also sought to separate their work from politics, in contrast to the actions of some of their predecessors, who had appeared as abettors of imperialist powers. They distanced themselves from their governments in order that the Chinese view them as agents of “God’s enterprise.” Jonathan Goforth proclaimed after the Boxer Uprising that all he wanted from Western governments was “to let Chinese rulers and people understand that our work is holy ... we do not need any special support” (Song, 1995, p.233).

To help the Christian enterprise, missionaries wooed the elite and befriended officials. As officials became more hospitable, many missionaries came to be on good terms with them. Quite a few fostered close relationships with local magistrates and provincial governors, such as William Charles White (later Anglican Bishop of Henan) did with the governor of Henan, through whom he exerted a great impact on the region (Song, 1995, p.80). To destroy the image of cultural imperialist and to pledge the Chinese their goodwill, some missionaries used the Boxer reparations to build schools. On one hand, this validated their magnanimity – in the words of Christian historian Wang Zhixin “it caused the anti-Christian psyche to evaporate” (Wang, 2004, p.213); while on the other hand these educational facilities attracted new converts and spread Christian values.

Indeed, education was a vital instrument for propagating the faith. Missionaries knew that building schools not only brought in students, but also established a channel for cultural dialogue. John R. Mott argued that it was important for the Chinese to be Christianized through retaining a tie with the church (Gu, 1996, p.378). With their effort, by 1915 the ratio of students in mission-run schools to those in Chinese public schools stood at 1: 6 (Gu, 1996, p.379). Numerous children were thus immersed in Christianity, but such immersion could blind them to native culture. The noted author Lin Yutang was born into a Presbyterian family and educated at a missionary school in Xiamen and then at St. John University in Shanghai. Later, he said he felt ashamed of his shallow understanding of his own culture. It was this painful guilt that urged him to become a pagan in order to learn Chinese literature (Malek, 2005, p.1088). The Lin case might be rare since many students

held to the faith. Interestingly enough, Lin in his later years returned to Christianity.

Perhaps the most influential missionary impact on Chinese society and education in the post-Boxer era was the establishment of universities. From the building of Dongwu University in Suzhou in 1901, some twenty universities were founded in the following four decades in major Chinese cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing or in provincial capitals (Gu, 1996, p.382). Although the number of college students was relatively small compared to the number in primary and middle schools, college students were drawn from the social elite and offered talents in short supply to the nation. For instance, by 1926, among the forty-three graduates from St. John University, seven had served as ministers in the Cabinet, sixteen became bureau heads of the central government, and fourteen found careers as managers of various railway companies (Gu, 1996, p.388). It is true that Christian converts seldom made up 50% of the student body; but as John Leighton Stuart expressed it in regard to Yenching University, the goal was Christianization not coercive conversion. Those graduates who held key positions naturally influenced Chinese politics and society, a benefit to the religion (Gu, 1996, p.385).

After 1900, missionaries gave more attention to medical care, one of the traditional channels to win converts. However, the difference was that before 1900 medical facilities consisted of small clinics and tiny dispensaries, but afterwards modern hospitals, nursing schools and medical schools mushroomed in China. According to Arthur Smith, by 1911 there were 170 hospitals and 151 dispensaries run by Protestant missionaries, and these accommodated 312,480 in-patients and 1,021,002 out-patients (Smith, 1912, p.265). In 1913, according to Bitton, the combined number of hospitals and dispensaries reached 386, serving 1,827,899 patients (Bitton, 1914, p.261). By 1937 French Catholic hospitals alone numbered more than seventy, while British and American Protestant hospitals totaled more than 300, along with 600 dispensaries or clinics (Gu, 1996, p.389). Modern medical facilities served to recruit converts, as many of them out of gratitude joined the church (Song, 1995, p.79). Sometimes missionaries offered free medicine to the poor on the condition that they believe in the Savior (Gu, 1996, p.390).

Missionaries in a sense were vanguards for social change as they championed reform of traditional social evils. They propagandized the danger of opium and aided in rehabilitation of addicts; they helped prostitutes abandon their profession; they convinced widows not to commit suicide upon the death of their husbands; and most importantly, they vigorously fought for the abolition of foot-binding. In doing so, missionaries established for themselves a positive image as a force for righteousness, justice, and progress. More often than not, they justified their position by reference to Christianity. Foot-binding, a millennium-old practice of promoting feminine beauty while confining women inside the home, offers an example. Missionaries saw it as a brutal disfigurement, stating that "it ruined God's creation ... it usurped God's power, and it is a heinous sin." Under their prompting, local governments established foot-binding eradication bureaus, many of whose officials and staff inside were Christians (Song, 1995, pp.130-131).

Missionaries even tried to transmute Christian values into Chinese daily routines. Although they admired Chinese diligence, they argued that breaks in the year-round routine were necessary. C. H. Fenn introduced the idea of Western holidays by proposing a day off each week. While this proposal had its origins in Western customs, missionaries offered a

justification in terms of faith; China, by observing the Sabbath, would honor one of the holy commandments and, as Fenn noted, “if only China could enjoy the grace of this Sabbath ... the people would receive thriving energy for their body, heart and soul” (Calvin College: De Korne Collection). Under this advice the Republic of China eventually accepted Sunday as a day of rest, a contribution to Chinese life for which missionaries were responsible.

The intent of missionary benefactors was to diminish antagonism to Christianity and to promote its acceptability. Missionary organization of Red Cross voluntary service during the many civil wars of the early 20th century provided help to civilians caught up in the strife. In the chaos, missionaries avoided involvement in the military conflicts, but employed the Red Cross to save lives and assist the countless refugees (Walmsley, 1974, p.131). Missionary work in famine relief demonstrated the philanthropic side of Christianity even more strongly. Missionaries and native co-religionists purchased food, built soup kitchens, offered free meals and provided other assistance. Often missionaries served as heads of relief committees. They raised funds and oversaw their distribution to the stricken areas. When needed, they appealed to their home country for donations. During the 1920-21 famine, for example, William Charles White requested Canadian Protestants to offer alms, and in response churches in Canada raised \$600,000 (Walmsley, 1974, p.132).

Although missionaries scored successes, they still encountered setbacks in evangelical activities. The immense size of the Chinese population posed a seemingly intractable problem. John Hawk wrote in 1907 that he travelled for 200 miles and in a short time had encountered half a million people: “while we would ask them if they knew of Christ, they would either reply in the negative or look amazed” (Saunders, 1972, p.37). John C. De Korne, after travelling for three weeks in Jiangsu and passing hundred of towns and thousands of villages, despondently recorded: “there is not now nor ever has been a single witness for Christ” (Calvin College: De Korne Collection). Lee Huizenga exclaimed in 1921 in Shanghai that Christianity “had but very little effect upon the Chinese people” in the city’s Old Town where “the influence of Christianity is still practically unknown to all appearance. What darkness! Send the light!” (Calvin College: Huizenga Collection). Even if thousands of missionaries worked in China, they and their Chinese co-workers were inescapably dwarfed by the size of the population they sought to reach. One missionary calculated in 1924 that on average one minister worked for over 50,000 souls, which was equivalent to “only five foreign workers to a mass of heathen greater than the population of Denver or Toledo, or only two foreign workers to a population as great as Ottawa or Quebec” (Calvin College: Beets Collection).

China’s traditional culture remained a barrier for missionaries as well. Many Chinese attended congregations out of curiosity. Once, James Addison Ingle was surprised on one occasion to find foreign missionaries looked at as “strange animals on exhibition” by the crowded throngs of a Chinese town. The local people waited the whole night because they “did not know exactly what sort of a beast he [the bishop] was, but dimly thought that he was something greater than a viceroy,” and “the sight of the foreign lady ... would repay the loss of sleep” (Jeffrey, 1913, p.209).

Many missionaries were chagrined by the fact that many converts only offered lip service to Christian beliefs, as they joined the church solely for personal help or gain. Such

people were known in the memorable phrase as “Rice Christians.” Henry Beets described these lukewarm converts as “Chinese Christians [who] were only accepting Christianity for the ‘loaves and fishes’ – the gifts and positions bestowed by the missionaries” (Calvin College: Beets Collection). Material benefit rather than genuine faith motivated them to join the church, a phenomenon which proved a lasting frustration to missionaries. Competition from other religions also drew on converts’ loyalties. Buddhism emerged as a major rival. Henry Beets referred in 1924 to a “change for worse. We refer to attempts to have Buddhism revived” (Calvin College: Beets Collection). Indeed, all religions in China enjoyed revival, but Islam was primarily confined to ethnic minorities, Daoism’s recovery was limited, and Confucianism, while powerful in its hold on the population, remained a set of social and ethical practices without a formalized religious structure. Buddhism presented the chief rival faith, and to deal with it missionaries devised new strategies. For example, Norwegian missionary Karl Ludvig Reichelt, who went to China in 1903, adopted a bold approach to convert Buddhists. He believed that Buddhist monks were “other sheep” of the flock and that their acceptance of Christ would come about naturally. To attract them he used incense and bells, attired himself in Chinese costume, and adopted a vegetarian diet. He even created a lotus-cross as the symbol for his mission (Malek, 2005, pp.1039-57). His conversion of a hundred Buddhist monks may testify to the success of his own endeavors, but throughout China Buddhism remained the dominant religious force.

Between 1922 and 1927 the growing nationalist movement put much pressure on missionaries as Christianity was deemed unscientific, illogical, outdated, and unfavorable to social progress (Yamamoto, 1953, p.138). In particular Christianity was attacked as a support of the evils of imperialism and capitalism (Hodus, 1930, p.490). There were instances of anti-missionary violence, and in 1927 over 3,000 missionaries temporarily left China (Yamamoto, 1953, p.136). This situation was short-lived, however, and did not cause much damage to the overall missionary enterprise. The nationalist movement had both liberal and radical progenitors, the former often sharing Christian values or sympathies, the latter influenced by Marxism and Soviet Bolshevism. Many missionaries worried that China would be swept into the communist abyss. De Korne, in his “Bolshevization of China” (1927), feared that “the spirit that came from Moscow has made China more violently anti-foreign than she has been since the Boxer days” (Calvin College: De Korne Collection). However, the communists did not seize national power at this time, and did not cause much trouble for the missionaries. The only impact was inside the small communist controlled bases, beyond which missionaries were largely unaffected. It was not until 1949 that the impact of communism fully came home to them, when they were all forcibly expelled from China.

The Process of Chinese Indigenization

The Boxer Uprising was a landmark for the Chinese church, as native believers thereafter endeavored to build an indigenous Christianity. Indeed, the rebellion itself was a corollary of cultural conflict, as the “imbalanced” and “unfavorable” import of the religion allowed only a “passive” acceptance by native Chinese. After 1900, Chinese Christians

realized the importance of distancing themselves from foreigners. One scholar coins the term “active acceptance” to portray Chinese efforts toward indigenization (Yu, 1997, p.164). During the following thirty-seven years, many Chinese believers set a goal of self-rule, self-support, and self-propagation, which incidentally challenges Timothy Brook’s view that the roots of the Three Self Movement are to be found in the years of the Japanese occupation (Bays, 1996, p.336).

In fact, insufficient man-power, cultural hurdles and racial barriers made missionaries accept the imperative of an indigenous church. James Addison Ingle observed in 1902 that “we are absolutely unlike the Chinese in every physical, mental and moral habit. Our best intentions are misunderstood and many of our best efforts wasted. Our only hope is in native workers” (Jefferys, 1913, p.219). Consequently, missionaries began to support the indigenous movement. This was confirmed in 1907 at the centenary conference in Shanghai celebrating the Protestant arrival in China when the participants declared that “independence of foreign control is the inherent right of the Chinese church ... it will solve in its own questions of organization and forms of worship, and it will build up its own theology” (Bitton, 1914, p.147). In his annual report in 1911, William Charles White told his home church that pastoral work in an organized Chinese congregation ought “to be done by a Chinese pastor” and that church affairs should be “carried on by the Chinese themselves” (Walmsley, 1974, p.107). Because of cultural differences, “no foreign Christian missionary can ever be completely fitted to express in its fullness, for men of another country than his own, the meaning of the Gospel of Christ” (Bitton, 1914, p.148).

Four models of Chinese-run churches emerged. The first was the combined church, within which Chinese Christians actively participated in initially foreign-run establishments and eventually became leaders. In fact, both Catholic and Protestant churches vigorously recruited Chinese as pastors, priests and staff. A number of Chinese were ordained as bishops and the number of priests increased rapidly. Eight hundred and thirty-four Chinese priests made up 35% of the clerical body of the Catholic Church in 1918; by 1926 the number rose to 1,184, comprising 41% of the total. In 1916, Chinese sisters in Catholic monasteries represented 66% of the total and this figure rose to 72% in 1926 (Charbonnier, 2007, pp.396-397). In 1926, the Pope consecrated six Chinese bishops at a four-hour ceremony in the Vatican. Protestant growth was more even more pronounced, as one source claims that by 1920 Chinese pastors outnumbered their foreign counterparts (Yu, 1997, p.82). With Chinese taking the lead, and foreigners pledging their continued support, this combined model enabled the church to grow at a remarkable pace.

The second model was the establishment of native churches with Westerners as advisors, which Chinese theologians like Zhao Zichen enthusiastically championed. In this model Western missionaries provided expertise and assistance if needed, but it was the Chinese who were in charge. Chinese leaders sought to disassociate themselves from politics as they engaged themselves deeply with Chinese society in their effort to build their “indigenous church” [bense jiaohui] (Shao, 1980, pp.550-552).

The third model was that of a totally autonomous Chinese church, what Daniel Bays termed a “wholly independent church” (Bays, 1996, p.265). According to one statistic, by 1926 more than 600 such self-reliant churches were operating throughout the country (Suman, 2006, p.149). As a result, a new generation of native theologians emerged as they

built their own churches free from foreign control and aid. Famous leaders, such as Yu Guozhen, Ni Tuosheng [Watchman Nee], Yang Shaotang, Rao Yumin, Wang Mingdao and Song Shangjie became nation-wide famous figures. Wang Mingdao, for example, was born to a Christian family in 1900 during the turmoil of the Boxer siege of Beijing, and attended foreign-run missionary schools. Nevertheless, he believed that the Chinese church should be totally independent. It was this belief that urged him to be rebaptized by a Chinese pastor in freezing winter water, challenging his first baptism by foreigners (Harvey, 2002, p.20). Later Wang built “The Christian Tabernacle” that attracted many thousands of converts, without a single dollar from foreign sources.

The fourth model was to turn the army into a Christian school. The most prominent example of this was provided by Feng Yuxiang, a famous and powerful general in northwestern China in the 1920s. Feng’s positive reputation arose partially from his faith, as he used Christianity to train his soldiers. Sun Yat-sen’s son, Sun Ke, said that “ever since he [Feng] became a Christian, he enforced strict disciplines in his army and never harassed people ... His troops possess high revolutionary spirit and are top-notch soldiers” (Shao, 1980, p.382). A foreign missionary was amazed in 1923 at such a Christian army and hoped that “General Feng can do a great deal towards the Christianization of his whole army” (Calvin College: Huizenga Collection). Feng not only influenced his soldiers but also their families, relatives and friends. An American observer noted that Feng’s army was “a Christian school for the common people” (Davis, 1925, p.8). It is not surprising that many missionaries called Feng China’s Oliver Cromwell (Calvin College: Kalsbeek Collection).

With the rising tide of nationalism, Chinese Christians strongly attacked imperialism in order to display their independence from foreign religious domination. By portraying Jesus as an anti-imperialist fighter and by stressing his death at the hands of Roman imperialists, they sought to show that Christianity was in no way linked to imperialism (Shao, 1980, p.374). In condemning foreign imperialism and exclusively concentrating on Jesus as savior, they even criticized foreign missionaries and their 19th century methods of propagating the gospel. As Wesley Shen wrote in 1927, “imperialism and capitalism should be overthrown” and “missionaries who came with foreign gunboats should be opposed” (Suman, 2006, p.149).

To underscore the indigenous nature of the Chinese church, Chinese theologians offered their own interpretations of Scripture. In recent years the native theology which took shape in the 1900-37 period has been extensively examined in the writings of Watchman Nee, Wang Mingdao, Zhao Zichen and other independent church leaders. It is interesting to note that many theologians interpreted Jesus from the Chinese humanistic tradition by portraying him as “an extraordinary person,” “a thorough human being” and “a great lover [of humanity]” (Malek, 2005, p.1233). Some Christian thinkers elaborated on the importance of their faith in saving China. Ma Xiangbo put it bluntly that religion, by which he implied Christianity, “is the only solution to the problem of human life” (De Bary, 2008, p.776). Xie Fuya argued that Christianity could fulfill China’s needs of national revolution, social revolution and spiritual revolution when he said in 1935 that “Christianity is revolutionary – at least Jesus himself is a symbol of a lump of raging fire. He threw the most explosive bomb to the old system, old culture and old thought ... He

was determined to establish a brand new society – a ‘Heavenly Kingdom’ of justice, freedom, equality and love” (Shao, 1980, p.649).

To enhance awareness of Christianity among the Chinese and to strengthen the converts’ faith, each church made full use of newsletters, posters, paintings, pamphlets and magazines. News reports treated church life, special tracts explained the Bible, pastoral editorials addressed special issues, and even cartoons delivered visualized spiritual meanings. Reports and stories were often couched in easy-to-comprehend vocabulary. Many journals and magazines had a long history, such as Wang Mingdao’s *Lingshi Jikan* [Spiritual Food Quarterly], which ran from 1927 to 1955 (Harvey, 2002, p.41). Central to publication of the Christian message was the Bible, and it enjoyed wide distribution. Many Christian scholars endeavored to standardize its translation and some studied it in its Greek and Hebrew origins to better understand it. One source states that the Bible was the publication most in demand in the 1910s. Although its sales dropped briefly in 1916 due to the depletion of the old Beijing version, the new translation in 1919 resulted in sales of the Bible in whole or in part leaping to four million copies a year (Suman, 2006, p.146).

To make a distinction between the Western church and native church, and to attract more believers, Chinese Christians worked to adopt a liturgy with native features. In the Declaration of the Chinese Church of 1922, Chinese Christians criticized the wholesale takeover of Western rituals, which was seen as “deplorable mimicry, unbeneficial to the long-term reconstruction and existence of Chinese Christianity.” Instead, “bold experiments should be undertaken “to safeguard the present church as truly indigenous” (Shao, 1980, pp.520-521).

Chinese Christians realized the danger of living in a religious vacuum isolated from society. From the beginning of the century they actively participated in reform movements directed against foot-binding, gambling, opium-smoking and superstition. As time passed, Chinese Christians devoted themselves to new social programs. By the 1930s a movement was underway to go to the rural areas to disseminate the Gospel. Christian thinker Yan Yangchu called on co-religionists to plunge themselves into the countryside to spread education and propagate religion. He advised them to change their focus from the urban centers to the rural areas, and urged them to “first rusticate themselves and then convert peasants” (Shao, 1980, p.508). This movement brought many urban Christians into contact with the great mass of the peasant population.

Chinese Christians gave full support to Sun Yat-sen’s Three Principles of the People, the official ideology of the Republic of China since the 1920s. They also advanced their own interpretation of the link between the Principles and Christianity. Apart from stressing that Sun Yat-sen was a Christian, they stressed that the Three Principles possessed a unique religious character. According to Xu Songshi, only Christianity enabled the Chinese to develop the true spirit of democracy under which national independence, equal rights and the welfare of all would be realized. “The Christian Three People’s Principles, after all, are to reform the country by establishing ‘the Heavenly Kingdom’ on earth” (Shao, 1980, p.480). In this way, Christianity fitted comfortably into the contemporary official political ideology.

Chinese Christians studied their religious rivals to find ways of increasing their own numbers. Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism had enjoyed a lofty position in the past, but

Daoism was now enfeebled, and Confucianism was under sustained intellectual attack since the New Culture Movement began in the mid-1910s. Buddhism, however, was enjoying a revival and was a formidable rival of Christianity in gaining souls. Christians therefore concentrated on Buddhism, condemning its believers for their lack of interest in social issues and their pursuit of unattainable other-worldly goals. However, Christians had to admit that Buddhism, originally a foreign religion, had taken deep root in Chinese soil. Zhao Zichen called on Christians to study the history of Buddhism. He identified six factors to account for Buddhist success in China: finding common ground with Chinese culture, gaining official support, facing challenges with courage, training talented leaders and faithful believers, effectively translating their scriptures, and relying on art as a medium for propagation (Shao, 1980, pp.282-286). These enabled Buddhism to penetrate into Chinese life and become an indigenous religion. Christianity should follow the same path for its own prospering.

Chinese Christians facilitated a cultural dialogue with Confucianism, as they realized its long-term influence could not be immediately eliminated. This was especially the case with one of its most prominent features, ancestor worship. When confronting this issue, Chinese Christians now adopted a position more flexible than the earlier one of outright rejection of the practice. Li Qinren, a Christian writer of a 1920s pamphlet entitled “Ancestors Should Be Worshipped,” argued straightforwardly that Christians should worship ancestors. While criticizing traditional attributes of ancestor worship such as meat sacrifices, paper-burning, and fengshui offerings, Li called for deep reverence of the great ancestor [God], upkeep of well-maintained cemeteries with ancestors’ names on the tombstones, display of ancestors’ portraits at home, and use of ancestors’ property for training educated, morally upright citizens so that laws would not be broken and disgrace not brought to the deceased (Calvin College: Kalsbeek Collection).

To demonstrate their patriotism to fellow citizens, Christians unambiguously expressed their love of country by vowing “to fight for national survival and common national hopes” (Shao, 1980, p.651). This became more salient after Japanese conquest of Northeast China [Manchuria] in 1931. While some believers hoped for the League of Nations to stop Japanese aggression, many Christians supported national resistance and non-cooperation with Japan. In their eyes, Japan’s aggression was evil and China’s self-defense would be assisted by God (Shao, 1980, p.482). They publicized their position and actively participated in anti-Japanese activities such as the December 9 Movement in 1935 (Dong Wang, 2008, p.55). In this way, Christians displayed that they were not indifferent to the national crisis, but passionate in their country’s defense.

Conclusion

The story of Christianity in early twentieth century China has been dominated by a scholastic focus on cultural clashes. Indeed, the 1900-37 period starts with xenophobic Boxers who indiscriminately victimized believers, and ends with aggressive Japanese

occupiers who enforced policies to restrict Christianity. Between the two dates, as one missionary observed, “China was in a constant state of turmoil from warlords, bandits, communist-inspired student agitations, and finally the Japanese invasion” (Perkins, 1967, p.14). Presumably, Christianity would suffer a setback, but in fact it experienced unprecedented growth. The multifold growth of churches and new converts naturally has caused these thirty-seven years to be called the golden age of the religion. A close review of the whole twentieth century highlights the importance of the 1900-37 period as a special time for Christianity.

In order to explain this golden age it is necessary to go beyond the church itself. The Christian revival must first focus on changing official attitudes. As a response to the national disaster of 1900, the sudden change of official stance dramatically benefited Christianity. As soon as the Boxers were suppressed, the Qing enforced a number of measures to safeguard missionaries, compensate them for their losses, and handle any anti-missionary incidents promptly. Interestingly enough, all the post-Qing claimants to power – Sun Yat-sen, Yuan Shi-kai and Chiang Kai-shek – were friendly to the church. They enacted constitutions giving Christianity legal equality and Christians freedom of faith. Whether motivated by political calculation or by personal belief, these men by their favorable measures shaped a positive relationship between church and state and offered an unrestricted milieu for the religion to prosper.

The Boxers taught foreign missionaries a serious lesson about rising nationalism and convinced them that new strategies must be adopted for the Chinese church. Native Chinese Christians should be brought into leadership roles, while missionaries had to show that they were spiritual workers, not imperialist invaders. Missionaries actively participated in fighting social evils, such as foot-binding and opium-smoking. To build a stronghold in society, they kept good relationships with officials and befriended social elites. For long-term influence, they established modern universities, middle schools and countless elementary schools. To be seen also as Samaritans, missionaries engaged in a wide scope of philanthropic activities, such as famine relief, refugee assistance and medical care. Even though missionaries encountered obstacles to their work, their evangelical enterprise went well. In 1931 H.A. Dykstra took satisfaction in observing that “since the Boxer troubles the missionary movement had been one of practically unhampered splendid progress” (Calvin College: De Korne Collection).

Attention should be given to native believers because the survival and growth of the religion were in part due to their response to demands of the time. Using a number of models, they moved toward indigenization, seeking common ground with Chinese culture. To highlight their new identity, Christian thinkers postulated Chinese style doctrines and practices. Using the vernacular language, they spread the biblical message through varied kinds of publications. Most importantly, they were determined not to shut themselves in the cloister, but rather to actively engage themselves in social reform and national salvation. All in all, Chinese Christians intended to establish a native church, a phenomenon unknown to the nineteenth century, but which would last to the present day. It was during the first thirty-seven years of the century that the Three Self Church had its origins.

Self-reliance enabled Chinese Christians to establish self-sustaining independent churches. Their success in doing so was significant. Yet they still faced great challenges as

they knew that Christians only constituted a tiny portion of the national population, only about one percent of the total. "Christianity is only the religion of a small minority," Zhao Zichen admitted in 1935, but its believers "should strive forward to turn this small minority to be a crack force penetrating into human hearts and society... and use that one as ten thousands ... which would be the true contribution of Christianity" (Shao, 1980, p.292). By 1937 the Chinese boasted an impressive number of church leaders, church staff and churchgoers, even though their numbers were still small in the population as a whole. Without doubt, the role played by Chinese Christians, now working in a new socio-political milieu with foreign missionaries, should be seen as the most important factor explaining the exceptional growth of the church during its twentieth century golden age.

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